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Mischa de Vreede: *HET LEVEN EEN FILM (LIFE A MOVIE)*, An Analysis

In his discussion of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Sartre makes a remark which has become a touchstone for modern fiction: "une technique romanesque renvoie toujours à la métaphysique du romancier."[1] This statement has given new vigour to the importance of technique and of vision, as it stresses their interrelatedness, and this notwithstanding the obvious irony of the concluding remark of Sartre's article on Faulkner's use of temporality, which dismisses Faulkner's vision: "J'aime son art, je ne crois pas à sa métaphysique ..."[2]

Mischa de Vreede's novel *LIFE A MOVIE* is yet another example of a work which depends for its intelligence on a careful study of its various verbal techniques, and on the manner in which they result in a new understanding of how men and women's views of each other are shaped by the arts, especially the media, while simultaneously they are shaping the media. Secondly, this novel also shows how aware its author is of continental critical thinking on the novel since Sartre. Her references to him and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as to other writers, explicitly affirm her indebtedness to modern critical theory and especially to such notions as intertextuality and to the signifying materiality of the sign: its meaning-generating potentiality.

We will begin our analysis of the novel with the title, because as Roland Barthes proclaims: "Tout, dans un récit, à des degrés divers ... signifie ... dans l'ordre du discours, ce qui est noté est, par définition, notable ..."[3] The title: *HET LEVEN EEN FILM (LIFE A MOVIE)* is not just presented to us in capital letters; on the cover it is surrounded with two strips of film, and, also, it lacks all punctuation. The use of the capital letters indicates that all aspects of the title are equally important. The strips of film, as they frame in the title, highlight the importance of that medium, it forms the basis and at the apex of the novel. The absence of punctuation permits the reader to think of the title in different ways but think about the title he shall, however tentative his perusing must remain. First of all, the lack of punctuation makes the title elliptical in two ways. It can be seen as signifying a comparison: *Life is like a movie*, or, conversely, an equation may be implied: *Life is a movie*. But neither of these versions exhausts the title, because the adjoining of the two substantives in capital letters affords them separate but equal status and hints that the novel deals with both of them conjointly as well as in a parallel fashion. Ultimately, whatever meaning we accord to the title, it will be evident that while reading the novel we must continually postpone our conclusions about it because the title has prepared us for the fact that the writing is suffused by tentativeness and open-endedness.

The opening paragraph of *LIFE A MOVIE* introduces us to familiar territory. It announces that the novel is going to assume the diary or journal form, but it does it in a manner that promptly evokes the opening

paragraphs of Sartre's *La Nausée*. This is how de Vreede's narrator opens the book:

> I must write everything down. I wish to determine what is happening in me, I must try to verbalize the emotions which are welling up in me now that I am plunging into the small task which has been imposed on me.[4]

Roquentin, Sartre's narrator in *La Nausée* opens the novel in a not dissimilar manner:

> The best thing would be to jot down the events from day to day. Keep a diary in order to understand them. Don't let the nuances, the little facts escape even if they seem like nothing and, above all, classify them.[5]

However, de Vreede's narrator's interests immediately begin to diverge from Roquentin's. Unlike him she will not keep a conventional diary, because she is not just interested in present events: she also wishes to come to grips with her and her husband's past and, since he is already eighty, their limited future. In this respect too *Life a Movie* differs from *La Nausée*. This is not the story of a loner who can view social relationships with a detached eye, but that of a woman who is married to a famous media person and movie critic who is twenty years her senior. His fame and his advanced age compel her to attempt a résumé of his career:

> I have to put order in his past, and for that I will have to think back more than ever on my own. That is very much to the point, because the manner in which we were initially so far removed from each other in time, came close, touched each other's lives, and then will lose one another: that has preoccupied me already for a long time.[6]

Purportedly then, this novel will represent the story and the analysis of an amorous relationship, and it will not concern itself greatly with chronological recounting of day-to-day events. However, matters esthetic, the nature of human time and of narration, are never far from the narrator's mind, just as is the case with Roquentin in *La Nausée*. If Roquentin introduces a paradox to explain story telling — he asserts that stories begin with their ending — de Vreede's narrator initiates her discussion with a pun. The inherently polysemous nature of the signifier permits her to associate "counting" with "recounting" and "to finish counting" with "to be counted out". In this manner she can link "adding" to "narration" and to "exhausting one's knowledge." As well her word playing permits her to jump from chapter one to chapter two and from the first installment of her story to a second and different one, as well as from her autobiography to biography. As she states:

> That is what is important to me, and therefore I do not need to mention the days about which I write. Then I can calmly and at my ease go from one to two and then on via three, four, and five through to infinity, which for me as a child was already such an awe-inspiring number and which as I aged appeared farther and farther away; while I know now that before I reach it I will be counted out. Stopped recounting. Recounting resembles counting, according to me. A good story starts with: there was once, and then one regularly adds something. From one thing come another, and I am now going from 1 to 2.[7]

It is this playfulness, the fact that this novel must be deciphered as if it were a cryptogram (as in *Nadja*[8] A. Breton says one must do with life) gives *Life a Movie* its modern and even contemporary cachet. Just as the narrator attempts to put back together the puzzle that will reveal the meaning of her and Adriaan's life, so the reader is guided along by linguistic markers toward the author's conception of what constitutes the true nature of modern life. One of the techniques used in this novel's carefully worked out structure, and something

which it has in common with *La Nausée*, is the use of *leitmotifs*. Roquentin's obsession with the blues tune: "Some of these days" finds a parallel in de Vreede's novel: its narrator regularly intersperses her musings with the line: "As I live with my body, I live with him."[9] She also quotes from the Dutch poet Adriaan Roland Holst with whom her husband shares his first name. His last name Colebrander imputes mythical qualities to him and links him to Vulcan, the smithy and the God of fire.

It is of course characteristic of modern literature that its protagonists live "by the book" and that their universes are bound by words and images whose referents are not necessarily found in reality. In the case of the narrator it is not just Holst's poetry but also Baudelaire's: "Ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme, et volupté" and Lodeizen's: "I know all the tears of loneliness"[10] as well as the already quoted line: "As I live with my body, I live with him", which are the touchstones of her psychic existence.

Another essential aspect of today's novel is its self-reflective nature. It functions as a hall of mirrors in which the protagonists' lives are featured and reflected in different ways. In Adriaan's case we soon discover that his life has already been the subject of a video programme destined for television, and that not surprisingly it is entitled: *Adriaan Colebrander, Het Leven Een Film*. That title is altogether appropriate because Colebrander had made his entire career out of the cinema and he had been intimately connected with the European avant-garde as it lived and worked in modern Paris. Adriaan's life may have been modelled on that of the Dutch Marxist cineast Joris Ivens, but in this novel we never learn much about the kind of movies Adriaan made or was involved with — a fact which, given the novel's realistic base, could be considered its most serious weakness. It is implied that the two-dimensional nature of the medium of photography and film has shaped and created two-dimensional, "flat" characters who can flow into film and out of reality just as the latter two can merge with each other.

The young researchers Ruben and Barbara, who are preparing the retrospective exhibition of Adriaan's life with the narrator's help, are respectively studying linguistics: the nature of language, and ecology: the preservation of nature. In Adriaan's archives, of which the narrator is doing the final sorting out, are preserved the verbal and ironic images which constitute Adriaan's universe and just as in this book the past, the present and the future are intermingled and reflected in each other, so also all its other aspects are functionally inter-related. We remember here Roland Barthes' rhetorical question: "Donc tout dans le récit est fonctionnel?",[12] without forgetting that the relationships in this novel are first of all of an associative and affective nature. Adriaan's archives have been classified by Elisabeth, his third wife (Clara, the narrator, is his fourth) not in chronological order but according to the women in Adriaan's life: according to an affective chronology. *Le temps humain*, to use an expression consecrated by G. Poulet, is, of course, the time which governs the narrative because it allows the narrator to jump from topic to topic by association of images, names, places, and dates. For example, while looking at a picture of Adriaan and Elisabeth she notices the date: May 12, 1948,[13] and she is mentally taken back to the time when her first husband, Hans, wanted their marriage to work like a book, specifically: *The Complete Marriage (Het volkomen huwelijk)* by Van der Velde.[14] Later on in the narrative we discover that Hans had abandoned her for a student who in turn has been dropped for another student. These serial but essentially monogamous relationships (at least that is the intention) are typical of the affective lives of the novel's characters, and in

that sense these liberated couples live like characters in the more classical novels of the type of *La Princesse de Clèves*, a novel in which a nearly infinite series of ménages à trois is interrupted only by the princess' refusal to "play the game."

The polysemous nature of language, which by free association permits the mind to move by leaps and bounds, also grants the narrator freedom from the constraints of time, place, and strict adherence to the facts. Unlike Gradgrind but much like Cissy in Dickens' *Hard Times*, the narrator's mind moves in affective circles. For example, one drawer of the archives has been labelled "Miscellaneous" by Elisabeth but the narrator mispronounces this as Miss Hillenius and, from there it is an easy step to label the pictures of the unknown ladies contained in the drawer as the various Misses Hillenius. But just as initially the narrator associates "counting" and "recounting", one can also conceive of an affective kind of counting. In the novel, the chapter that follows chapter 14 is numbered 115 and chapter 119 is succeeded by chapter 220. These numerical leaps are deliberate because they mark dramatic shifts in the narrator's existence: chapter 115 recounts Adriaan's stroke and chapter 220 deals with the arrival from America of Colin, Adriaan's son by his first wife Joyce.

Of course, the nature of events in the novel is always appropriately dramatic. Adriaan's stroke takes place while they are watching the video tape of his life entitled: LIFE A MOVIE. It occurs at the precise moment when Adriaan is evoking the tragic death of Judith Blum at the hands of the Nazis and the concomitant guilt complex which he has carried within him ever since. While on the screen he is talking about what killed her and what has been gnawing away at him, he is stricken by the apoplexy which will soon kill him. The intersection of life and the media is both neat and dramatic and, in Adriaan's case, not at all surprising. As a journalist and scriptwriter he is both a creator and a product of the media, and his usefulness and that of others resides in the degree to which anyone's life can be exploited in print or on the screen. In Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Swann habitually mistakes art for reality, but in the novel there really is no longer a clear-cut dividing line between the two. However, one can maintain that in *LIFE A MOVIE*, life is often made subservient to the media. Adriaan is interesting to others because of his media career, and he measures other people's lives in terms of their usefulness to him and his art: "Therein consisted his influence on the post war art world and his greatest contribution."[15] Even Clara, the narrator, cannot escape the movies' all-pervasive influence:

> I bent over him and I kissed his face as I have always wanted to kiss the man I love: very often, very quickly, and with barely opened lips. I learned that from Grace Kelly and the way she kissed the semi-invalid James Stewart in *Rear Window*. Sometimes my life also resembles a movie.[16]

The point we wish to make is that in modern society the barrier between image and reality, and between fact and fiction, has vanished to the extent that eventually fiction can take the place of reality. This supplanting of fact by fiction actually occurs in a story which the narrator tells about the war and which is largely invented. This mini-récit parallels the story told by Clamence in Camus' *La Chute*. Its setting is Amsterdam and its ever-widening circles of canals; however, Clamence relates how he had refused to come to the aid of a girl drowning in the Seine. Clara recounts the story of a Wehrmacht soldier who falls in one of Amsterdam's canals but who, she claims,

she had pushed into the water so that he would drown. Clamence is persistently wracked by his own moral mediocrity, Clara's sense of guilt derives only from the fact that her fictionalized account has been accepted as true and has seemingly forever supplanted the facts. But just as life stops eventually so stories are forgotten, as she discovers when years later she asks her first husband if he remembers the story: "He could not remember a thing about it and I left it at that."[17] Whatever their truth quotient, however, such stories retain their value, as is remarked by Elisabeth, who has had a similar experience. Her stories about life in a Japanese prison camp, regardless of whether she witnessed the events she describes, made her after the war an appealing substitute for Judith whose life Adriaan had been unable to save. Her stories are equally useful to her second husband Nico who, like her, hails from Indonesia but cannot remember his youth. They quite literally fill the lacuna created by his amnesia and he needs these stories, whether they are fact or fiction, to provide him with an underpinning for his prsent existence.

In the final chapter, the narrator prepares to leave for Ann Arbor, Michigan, and join up with Adriaan's son, Colin. It is at this point that fiction flows into reality — not for the narrator but for the author: Mischa de Vreede's autobiography begins to intersect with Clara's, the narrator's, because the author did spend the academic year 1983-1984 in that city. M. de Vreede is now back in Amsterdam, where no doubt her stay in America strikes her as having passed by as if it were a movie.

This leads us to the following concluding remarks about *LIFE A MOVIE*. As in the case for much modern fiction, it is also meta-fiction: it is not just a story — it also provides a simultaneous commentary about the function of fiction in our lives. It states most forcefully that fiction has become the sustaining force of life, because it lasts, and that more often than not man has made himself subservient to fiction and the media. Additionally, the two-dimensional nature of the media has created a universe where life and fiction fuse and become separate again with the greatest of ease, because the fictionalized life, and life led as if it were a fiction (vide Malraux), have effaced the respective distinctiveness of each. If in the nineteenth century one could speak of the prison-house of art and discuss endlessly the hierarchical relationship of the arts and their link with reality, today life and art dovetail to the extent that often they have become interchangeable; they also stimulate and sustain one another and they serve as each other's models. Finally, *HET LEVEN EEN FILM* is yet another confirmation that at present we are not just surrounded by a wall of verbal and pictorial images, but that as a consequence man himself has turned inside out and "his inner self" has been transformed into a two-dimensional exterior; he has changed into a concoction of sound, gestures and shapes that were initially projected on him by the arts and the mass media, so that now he can stage himself as his own production. Consequently we can state that today whatever is, in human terms, is first of all someone's projection of it.

NOTES

[1] *Situations, I.*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1947) p. 66

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[3] "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications*, 8 (Paris, Seuil, "Points", 1981) p. 13.

[4] M. de Vreede, *HET LEVEN EEN FILM.* (Amsterdam, de bezige bij, 1984), p. 5. All translations are by the

author of this article.

[5] J.-P. Sartre, *La Nausée, Oeuvres romanesques* (Paris, La Pléiade, 1981), p. 5.

[6] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 5-6.

[7] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM,* p. 6.

[8] Paris, Gallimard, Folio, 1964, p. 133.

[9] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 5, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, etc.

[10] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 20, 31, etc.

[11] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 118.

[12] *Op. cit.,* p. 13.

[13] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 18.

[14] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM,* p. 18.

[15] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM,* p. 135-136.

[16] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 137.

[17] *HET LEVEN EEN FILM*, p. 82.